

# Democracy & Education

## Transaction Circles with Digital Texts as a Foundation for Democratic Practices

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### Abstract

Transaction circles weave together elements of guided reading and literature circles in an open conversational structure that supports students as agentive learners. Discourse within these circles utilizing digital informational texts assist in the development of democratic practices even in a time when federal mandates limit curricula and prescribe programs. The findings of this study reveal the importance of aesthetic learning experiences in knowledge construction and the ways in which thinking through complex issues with others benefits social action.

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*This essential institution [public school], responsible for producing a democratic citizenry and tasked with providing equality of educational opportunity, is at risk (Ravitch, 2013, p. 5).*

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MEDIA SATURATES the world with information in complex, multimodal forms that influence and shape the way people think, develop ideas, and act in a democracy. Frequently, the ways in which readers are positioned through these media texts goes unnoticed, and unfortunately, bias, validity, and dominant ideologies are unquestioned. This is where critical media literacy becomes an important force in a democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007).

In order to fully participate in a democratic society, critical media literacy (challenging the subjectivity and biases of messages) must be cultivated in response to multimedia communications sent in the interests of elites and various other institutions (Kellner & Share, 2007). Literacy cannot be simply reduced to a functional perspective where it is only about economic interests, training

workers, and transmitting knowledge (Giroux, 1988). Instead, I argue for a type of literacy competence that includes social practices encouraging students to collectively question the way things are and move toward action for the advancement of society (Shannon, 2011).

Therefore, becoming literate must be expanded to involve critical consciousness or understanding one's position and relationship to texts and conceptualizing related actions (Luke, 1997). It must also take into account digital, high-speed forms of communication like sending e-mails, uploading images, and interacting with social media sites such as YouTube. As a result, new tools and ways of engaging through literacy must be learned to critically interpret

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messages and produce media that shapes the world in a positive way (Morrell, 2012). This type of critical media literacy instruction requires teachers to have the instructional time to devote to learning ways to resist media manipulation, explore the voices of oppressed people, and motivate student participation in civic life (Kellner & Share, 2007).

In this article, I offer a new curricular structure, transaction circles, which provides space for a small group of students to engage in literacy as a democratic act using digital texts. I suggest transaction circles as an alternative to traditional literature circles and guided reading groups for democratic literacy instruction. Theories about democratic education and reader response theory provide the framework for investigating how interacting with informational texts during transaction circles helped students develop the democratic skills needed for 21st-century citizenship. This qualitative, year-long study involved five third-grade students and documented the discourse used during transaction circles where texts were presented on an e-reader in digital format. Finally, classroom applications are presented that offer ways for educators to use literacy critically for developing the democratic skills needed for future civic engagement.

### **Guided Reading and Literature Circles**

Guided reading is a curricular structure for reading lessons that teachers continue to utilize for small-group instruction in classrooms. It involves using leveled books to scaffold students' understanding of the reading process over time with increasingly difficult texts. Guided reading is driven by the teacher who chooses the text, introduces it, decides on the teaching moves or mini lessons, guides the reading, and leads the book discussion (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). While this strategy has its benefits, it does little to promote democratic thinking in students because it provides little space for student voices, personal interpretations, and critical examinations of multimedia texts.

Literature circles operate in a different fashion. They still involve small-group reading instruction but are student-centered. The teacher serves as a facilitator as students meet to discuss books of their choice. Students may or may not bring notes to the discussion and assume roles like connector, literary luminary, word wizard, scene setter, etc. Conversations about the books steer natural interactions within the group. The literature circles end when students complete their books and share with the class (Daniels, 2002).

Although there are many benefits to literature circles, like student engagement and choice, some disadvantages persist. For example, Daniels (2002; 2006), who developed literature circles, has acknowledged problems with teachers' implementation of this structure. One such issue is the use of assigned student roles, which can restrict the type of democratic dialogue I argue for in this paper. As students enact these roles, some become restricted to "assignments" rather than engaging in talk that promotes divergent thinking, expressing multiple perspectives, questioning, and interpreting the text. Another issue facing teachers during the implementation of literature circles is the independent nature of them. Since the teacher is not there to facilitate the group, many

times students engage in off-topic discussions or respond in negative ways to the ideas of others.

In general, both of these structures, literature circles and guided reading, lack a focus on critical media literacy, while transaction circles encourage students to question messages presented in texts. For example, the choice of text has a significant impact on the dialogue that ensues during instruction. Guided reading relies on leveled readers, which tend to be low-quality books published for the exclusive purpose of teaching reading, rather than high-quality literature that invokes deep thoughts about societal injustices. The literature circle books are chosen by the students, and they may avoid texts that deal with difficult issues. Finally, multimedia forms of texts like YouTube videos are not used within these structures.

### **Transactional Theory**

Examining the role of transactional theory becomes paramount as one contemplates a democratic education that prepares students to interact with multimedia communications in a critically conscious manner. Transactional theory emphasizes the active role of the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1985). The transaction, or meaning making, occurs as the reader applies both cognitive and affective elements to a text, resulting in either efferent or aesthetic reading. The language used in a text elicits particular images and meanings for the reader and makes the reading personal. As a result, the reader comes away from the reading with a unique understanding of the text that is influenced by the reader's culture and past experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995). In other words, the reader's attention is on personal, affective, lived-through experiences during the reading (Rosenblatt, 1985).

Rosenblatt (1995) connected citizenship with the ability to imagine and make personal and social choices. She believes individuals should be committed to their ideas while maintaining openness to alternative views. Accordingly, students must be given opportunities to develop their own understanding of the world by making decisions and offering solutions. As students learn new information or perspectives, they contemplate novel theories and develop personally meaningful questions to explore and ways to question the world (Damico & Riddle, 2006). Interactions with texts are just one way to liberate ideas and provide avenues for thinking about the past and new ways to envision the future (McElvain, 2010). Rosenblatt (1995) reminded us, "The task of education is to supply [the student] with the knowledge, the mental habits, and the emotional impetus that will enable him to independently solve his problems" (p. 125). It is this mantra that underlies a democratic education where students are motivated to critically interpret multiple forms of text and conceptualize future possibilities.

### **Sociocultural Influences**

Intermingled within an education guided by democratic principles are personal transactions with texts that are influenced by sociocultural factors. A sociocultural perspective involves acquiring knowledge through shared events in cultural communities where learning is mediated among learners using language as a tool

(Vygotsky, 1986). At times, this learning takes the form of apprenticeships, where companions support and broaden one another's understanding of the world (Rogoff, 1990). All learners bring background knowledge to the interaction and extend this through social interactions with others.

Joint meaning making results when "one also makes meaning for oneself and, in the process, extends one's own understanding" (Wells, 1999, p. 108). This learning together, or collaborative thinking, requires the use of language in ways that do not occur routinely in daily life. Classrooms may serve as spaces where a particular type of apprenticeship occurs, offering students an opportunity to learn an awareness and appreciation of different discourse repertoires and how these are used in multiple contexts. Specifically, students can learn to navigate strategies for expressing their viewpoints and listening to and appreciating those of their peers who may feel differently about significant issues (Mercer, 2007).

Mercer (2007) suggested encouraging exploratory talk among students and using language as a thinking tool for coreasoning. Exploratory talk involves critically and constructively considering the ideas of others where there may be challenges or counter challenges with supportive reasons. Students are accountable for supporting their arguments and can use this as a basis for coming to an agreement or making joint progress. This is particularly important as people work to understand one another and the ever-changing conditions in which they live and work.

Nurturing democratic principles requires many elements, such as space for expression of divergent ideas, time to draw upon cultural resources, and an interpretive community that approaches thinking in fluid and flexible ways. It is the right and responsibility of teachers and students to collaborate with others on an intellectual basis as a way to positively contribute to communities and humankind (Mayer, 2012). Classrooms serve as a local hub for the development of literacies that tie community issues to larger global concerns (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012).

## Democracy and Education

An education guided by democratic principles focused on informed citizenry involves teaching students to propose new ideas, ask questions, be curious, and know that change is possible. It should include valuing every student (Ayers, 2009) and providing the freedom to express thinking through multiple forms of expression (Freire, 1998). This type of education also broadens students' ability to understand multiple perspectives through the eyes of diverse others and to work toward future actions that create a better world. In other words, students pivot upon democracy and freedom ideologies to use their minds and test their capacities to learn from others (Greene, 1988).

A literacy classroom that cultivates spaces where all student voices can be heard and no "right" answers to questions are sought is a democratic one. I contend that continual dialogue provides a context for exploration of ideas and representations of the world as opposed to a democratic education that is geared toward individualism and work force preparation. Learning to question the world builds a sense of agency for students as they learn to think

independently instead of shaping responses that represent someone else's interpretation (Ayers, 2004).

Within this type of dialogic framework, reading represents the power of students to impact their destinies and positions in the world by critically constructing meaning of multimodal texts and employing an agentive stance (Ayers, 2004). Real reading is not about memorizing words. Rather, it is a political and creative act of knowing that one is responsible for forming one's own knowledge in a way where worldly and cultural experiences give rise to interpretation of texts and how to use this perspective to create change (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In order for democracy to thrive, students must learn to mediate differences and share meanings as a basis for social living within communities. Multiple interpretations evolve through a collaborative mediation in social conversations, and as a result, all students are able to develop confidence and a level of comfort in contributing to the group (Pradl, 1996). Growth can be marked by pushing of boundaries, hearing diverse perspectives, and contesting the ideas of others. Society advances as spaces are crafted for one another through open-mindedness. Somewhere along the line, we forgot that children grow up to be more than simple-minded wage earners. They become citizens in a democracy where skills like lifelong learning, creativity, and collaboration are essential (Johnston, 2012).

## Transaction Circles

Given the disadvantages that persist with literature circles and guided reading, along with the need for students to develop democratic practices, I developed an innovative instructional method called transaction circles. This concept is brand-new and has not been explored in the literature as of yet. My intent was to better utilize literacy as a tool for developing democratic practices (Figure 1). In my own classroom experiences, both guided reading groups and literature circles were stifling student voice and agency in multiple ways. To address this issue, I blended aspects of both structures together to form transaction circles, which seem to provide a space where students use literacy to challenge or rethink socially relevant topics.



Figure 1. Transaction Circle Model

In transaction circles, the teacher chooses the text based on student reading levels, student interests, and quality of the literature. The teacher selection of texts ensures the use of high-quality literature, which is essential for promoting engagement and rich conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 2007; Short & Kauffman, 2005). This quality literature is based on several criteria, including notable award-winning texts, rich visual images that avoid stereotypes, and diversity of characters and issues. Leaving the text selection completely in the hands of students may result in a limited exposure to diverse topics (i.e., equity, gender roles, and race) that are vital in a democracy.

The students meet in a small group, and the teacher facilitates the reading process. The students hold the power when it comes to the talk, and the transactions are active, ongoing processes that are parts of the total context (Rosenblatt, 1985). Students are expected to make sense of their textual experiences through discourse contributions (Mills & Jennings, 2011; Wells, 1999) such as contingent stances, “a willingness to listen attentively, and then to influence and be influenced by the unfolding talk” (Boyd & Galda, 2011, p. 3). Transaction circles thrive on students being open to the ideas, comments, and experiences of others in the group, which are also essential aspects of a democracy.

Unlike literature circles, where students read the text independently and come together for the book discussions, transaction circles require the students to read the text in the presence of the group and teacher (as in, guided reading). As issues related to reading arise (e.g., vocabulary, understanding points of view, character’s actions, and factual information), the students seek help from one another or the teacher to resolve the problems. In addition, spontaneous talk about the texts is central, using open conversational structures. Students lead the dialogue and do not rely on the teacher to ask “comprehension” questions.

Table 1 provides the principles that guide dialogue and interactions during transaction circles. Both verbal and nonverbal cues move students to continue open-ended talk that exposes

multiple points of view and opens spaces for talk. Language serves as a cultural tool for joint knowledge development (Mercer, 2007) with an emphasis on active, aesthetic reading experiences that foster opportunities to build democratic competencies.

### Method

This article focuses on a subset of data, one small group working with four texts over a six-week period, from a larger study examining how transaction circles using informational digital texts help students develop democratic skills needed for participation in 21st-century communities. This small group of third graders (ages eight to ten) consisted of four African American males and one African American female from a multiethnic, multilingual, Title I public elementary school. The makeup of the group was predetermined by the classroom teacher, given his small-group instructional routines. All of the students were reading at grade level, as measured by running records administered at the beginning and end of the year-long study.

The small group of students met with me two days per week in their classroom for approximately 20–30 minute each session. During this time, I engaged them in transaction circles with digital texts using Nook e-readers (with Wi-Fi Internet access) while the remainder of the class was instructed by the classroom teacher using the traditional basal reading series provided by the school district. All of the small-group interactions were videotaped and transcribed using NVivo.

For the purpose of this article, informational texts are broadly defined to include true stories written in a narrative format, in addition to considering YouTube videos as digital texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). These texts were chosen to inform students of real events. Four specific texts served the basis for the analysis of this article: *Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia* (Winter, 2010), *Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter, 2009), *Biblioburro—The Donkey Library* YouTube video (Canavesio & Hagerty, 2009), and *Malala Yousafzai Returns to*

**Table 1.** Guidelines for Transaction Circles  
The following principles have been used to guide the interactions of the transaction circles for maximizing student dialogue and inquiry:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Purposeful selection of socially relevant texts based on current events, where issues of democracy are a focus</li> <li>2. Pairing of digital, print-based texts with YouTube videos on the same topic</li> <li>3. Informality (e.g., a teacher’s guide with predetermined questions was not used; students did not raise their hands to speak; there were no worksheets or other assigned “work” or grades related to the discussions)</li> <li>4. Student control (or agency) over the texts and digital devices</li> <li>5. Encouragement of student-to-student talk through: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Responses like “Why don’t you ask someone else what they think about it?” “I wonder how X feels about that,” or “Listen to what X is saying.”</li> <li>b. Nonverbal responses from the teacher (e.g., smiling or nodding when students talk to one another about the texts)</li> <li>c. Close seating arrangements</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. Minimal teacher talk, facilitated by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Responses like “Well, what do you think?”</li> <li>b. Extended wait time</li> <li>c. Valuing of individual voices</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
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School YouTube video (ABC News, 2013). The two Winter texts appear as duplicates of the paper-based versions on the e-readers.

The larger study lasted a year, but this analysis focuses on student transactions with four informational texts over a six-week period in the spring of 2013. Brief introductions were given about each text followed by independent reading or viewing. The guidelines in Table 1 were used to promote exploratory-type talk. During this time, students controlled the talk (e.g., topics, timing, formats, and recipients) that occurred while engaging with the digital texts. Multiple perspectives were listened to and considered by the group while interpreting the texts (Pradl, 1996).

Analysis of Data

A grounded theory approach, where coding emerges from close, repeated readings of the transcripts (Charmaz, 2006), guided the qualitative data analysis. A total of nine codes related to democratic practices surfaced (Figure 2). A participant framework analysis was applied to “identify and unpack representative portions of a discussion in order to locate salient characteristics of particular pedagogical interactions” (Mayer, 2012, p. 54). This meant considering both implicit and explicit cues in the moment-by-moment interactions (Mayer, 2012). Then, critical discourse analysis was applied to transcripts in order to locate instances of collaborative knowledge construction where interpretative authority was shared among peers. In particular instances, students were positioned as interlocutors to explain, challenge, or convince others of individual views (Mayer, 2012; Rex & Schiller, 2009).

Findings

These findings were the result of face-to-face interactions where discourse was an action tool for interpreting texts (Wells, 1999). The students developed cohesiveness as a group over the course of the first semester as they established rhythms for transacting in unstructured conversations while moving back and forth between reading and talk. Relationships between students grew through the comfortable interpersonal tone of the interactions (Mayer, 2012) and by experiences initiating dialogue (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Students gained confidence over time in their own agency as knowledge builders (Mills & Jennings, 2011).

Initiating Knowledge Construction	Challenging Assumptions	Accepting Alternative Viewpoints
Taking Responsibility for Helping Others Learn	Expressing One’s Own Ideas	Questioning
Exploring New Ideas	Talking about Difficult Issues	Identifying of Injustice

Figure 2. Coding for Democratic Practices

The transaction circles facilitated aesthetic reading experiences where “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). The mental effort of the group was distributed to allow each student to produce and comprehend the utterances of their peers (Wells, 1999). The analyses of the discourse surrounding the informational texts yielded four democratic themes: considering the complexities—no easy answers; retheorizing as a problem solver; understanding the larger world; and questioning leads to more questions.

Considering the Complexities—No Easy Answers

The small group was seated around a kidney-shaped table in the back of the classroom for an initial reading of the digital version of *Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia* (Winter, 2010). This particular picture book was used because of its colorful images depicting the real-life journey of Luis Soriano, when he shared books with the children of Colombia by delivering the stories on the backs of his two burros, Alfa and Beto. As soon as the students opened their e-books a loud chatter filled the space as they spontaneously commented about the illustrations and tapped through the pages.

Soon, the students began reading the text and were introduced to Luis, his two burros, and this notion of a quest to deliver books to children. At this point, the students were rather quiet, as they read, until Luis arrived at the village with the books. Then, Anthony initiated the following event after reading the sentence, “The children of El Tormento run to meet him.”

Transcript 1

Line	Initiator	Responder	Dialogue
14	Anthony		Yeah. Get it. That guy, what’s his name. (Flipped page.) Oh, Luis. He takes books to poor kids. They don’t have books. I guess they don’t go to school like us. I wonder why. Everybody has to be at school or they’re in trouble.
15		Jamal	It’s not fair that some kids don’t go to school. We have to.
16		Researcher	Well, there may not be a school for them to attend. How would you feel if you did not have any books to read or a school to go to?

17		Andre	It would not be good. You have to know how to read, so you can learn stuff like in the book the “Three Little Pigs.” I read it when I was little—it’s a good one—and then you have to know stuff too, like science stuff about animals.
18	Anthony		Are there kids who don’t know how to read (Pointed to picture of the Colombian jungle)?
19		Researcher	Yes. Some children and adults have not learned to read.
20		Jamal	Maybe they got no books like in this story. Can’t read without books, and that is why the guy, the man, is helping. Look. (Flipped to page of Luis reading aloud to children.) He read to kids. (Inaudible.) I think he’s like a hero or something.
21		Andre	Maybe they don’t want to read. Some people don’t want to read, you know.
22		Jamal	Yeah, you know. Like people in this class. There are some don’t want to read. (Pointed to a student.) Like me. Sometimes I don’t read. (Laughed.) I hate boring stuff, so I just don’t read. But, I can read, if I want to. Like now. I’m reading this.
23		Ayana	I don’t know. I think they might want to read if they could, and you can’t, can’t really learn if you don’t read.
24		Andre	Not reading is not the same as not knowing [how] to read. I wouldn’t want to not know to read. That would be bad . . .

Anthony began with self-talk as a strategy to articulate his interpretation of the current events in the text (14) and posed a playful “I wonder” statement initiating a probe to expand the conversation about the role of Luis and access to books. His expression of wondering opened the discourse, thus inviting conjecture and speculation from his peers. This was an act of courage as Anthony intentionally voiced his vulnerabilities (Lindfors, 1999). Jamal extended the conversation through an improvisational comment about fairness (Pradl, 1996), while Andre listened to these concerns and responded in a personally relevant way (17).

Anthony continued to struggle with the notion of children who did not know how to read (18). This seemed to conflict with his current knowledge but pushed him to develop the capacity to notice the perspectives of others. Jamal hypothesized the existence of this problem and referred the group to the text to inquire about how reading develops. Then, Andre and Jamal proposed an alternative view, suggesting one must have a desire to read (21–22) (Greene, 1988). The unfolding inquiry was sustained through the contingent stances adopted by the students. Each was willing to listen and be influenced by the developing discourse (Boyd & Galda, 2011).

The group continued to work together to articulate their thoughts and move toward a collective understanding of the information presented (Wells, 1999). Here, the students decided what was relevant given the text, the context, their attitudes, and their knowledge, thus indicating the necessity of personal contributions from each reader in order for spontaneous talk to unfold (Rosenblatt, 1995). The affective event was intertwined with the intellectual as the back-and-forth dialogue brought together living histories that formed a “linguistic-experiential reservoir” (Rosenblatt, 1994) useful for considering the complexities associated with reading, schooling, and access to books. The students moved to expand their understanding of literacy beyond a functional perspective where it is used for limited purposes related to transmitting knowledge for someone else’s purpose.

### ***Retheorizing as a Problem Solver***

One aspect of democracy is the ability to construct knowledge about the world and to use this information for change (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This requires students to consider the depth of real-world issues where there is more than one perspective about reading and access to books. The biblioburro video (Canavesio & Hagerty, 2009) began with an image of the real Luis Soriano riding a burro with children walking beside him down a dirt road in Colombia, and it mirrored the story told in the book version. This digital text was in Spanish with English subtitles, so the small group read the subtitles.

Two children discussed the benefits of Luis’s visits to their village, and one child explained how important it was to be able to read letters for his family. The children were filled with smiles as Luis entered the village and crowded around him to receive books. Then, Luis explained his goal of combatting what he referred to as the “farmer’s ignorance.” He described this as educating rural children about their rights, commitments, and duties as citizens. Approximately 3:30 into the video, the following literacy event occurred.

Line	Initiator	Responder	Dialogue
78	Brandon		See, they like him. They like getting the books. And see what it says here. Oh, let me stop it. No, wait. Back up. (Replayed a section of the video.) I think they already know how to read. We thought they couldn't read . . . but maybe they can.
79		Anthony	Yeah, yeah. Look! They are reading. (Pointed to video.) We were wrong. I know—get the book.
80	Brandon		Dr. Brown, can we open the book on that Nook to look at it?
81		Researcher	Yes. Go ahead.
82		Brandon	(Located Biblioburro on another e-reader. Brandon, Anthony, and Ayana gathered around to see the text.)
83		Ayana	(Began reading text aloud.) I don't think it says that. No, not here or here. (Continued reading aloud.)
84		Anthony	Oh, wait, wait! (Stopped Ayana's reading.) This page, right here. (Began reading.) "As the children read borrowed books deep into the night." It says children read. They read books. (Smiled.)
85		Brandon	So, they can read. It says it here and in the video.
86	Ayana		But, how can they learn to read? They didn't have books or a teacher.
87		Anthony	You know, it's like they learn from their moms and stuff. And, and that burro man, he reads to them. They listen. Remember the Three Pigs in the book.

88		Brandon	Yep. They don't have reading problems. They got book problems. I think it says he got 120 books, and that's not enough for all of those kids. See. (Pointed to screen.) He goes all over with the donkey and needs more books.
89		Ayana	I could give them some books. I have some I don't read anymore . . .

There were several salient features in this exchange. First, Brandon began to question his initial assumption (78) about the children in Colombia that arose from reading the book by taking the initiative to articulate his thoughts (Jennings, O'Keefe, & Shamlin, 1999). Anthony heard Brandon's comment and assumed a contingent stance where he listened attentively to the proposed idea (Boyd & Galda, 2011). Upon consideration of this new idea, Anthony added to it by interjecting information from the video to support Brandon's new hypothesis (79). Brandon moved to revisit the book (using another e-reader), so the video and book could be displayed simultaneously. It seemed that he was interested in convincing others about this new idea, that the children already knew how to read (Mayer, 2012).

At this point, Ayana noticed the controversy and joined the quest to solve the problem (83). She assumed the lead by reading the text to the group while everyone listened for evidence to confirm or disprove the new hypothesis. Anthony stopped Ayana when he heard her read the section about the children reading books (84). The group concluded that the children knew how to read, and the problem was more about access to books (85–88). The old (reading of the book) was used to assist in interpreting the new (video) (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Later, Ayana spoke up and asked a genuine question in response to the previous dialogue as an attempt to resolve the issue (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Both Anthony and Brandon (87–88) validated Ayana's question and expanded their knowledge of the topic. Anthony used a narrative format to tell a story about how the children may have learned to read. It appeared this was connected to his personal experiences. Ayana imagined a possible solution (89) that involved using this knowledge base to take personal action to assist children in another community (Chandler-Von Dras, 1993; Greene, 1988; Short & Kauffman, 2005). The interaction with this text promoted social action. Ayana offered books to the students in need of them.

This dialogue provided a space to explore an aspect of the informational texts that the students found significant (Ayers, 2004). Clearly, Ayana, Brandon, and Anthony were learning from one another by considering an alternative view—the children were not illiterate (Greene, 1988). Power was circulated equally among this sequence of conversational turns as each speaker acknowledged the previous responses and built upon existing knowledge

coconstructed by the group (Rex & Schiller, 2009). This idea of being a problem solver became a possibility for students. They began to recognize ways to connect to the larger world outside the classroom and the possibility of enacting change.

Understanding the Larger World

The initial reading of *Nasreen’s Secret School* (Winter, 2009) sparked a discussion regarding the rights of girls in a culture very different from their own. The text portrayed the true story of a girl growing up in Afghanistan who was not permitted to attend school under the rule of the Taliban. Books were the means through which Nasreen illustrated the power of education to change one’s life.

Immediately, the students questioned the title and wanted to know why a secret school was needed. There were also questions about how to pronounce the name Nasreen and read the word Afghanistan. Once this was addressed, the students rapidly fired comments about their connections to Afghanistan. These consisted of media-based news reports and familial experiences serving in the wars in the Middle East. The students had no real differentiation between Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, but all understood that the Taliban were an enemy of the United States. The following conversation focused on the gender issue related to literacy.

37	Jamal		It says they have to sneak away from the soldiers. What if they get seen?
38		Ayana	But they got caught. Look at this page. (Pointed to angry-looking Taliban soldier.)
39		Jamal	Oh, I get it. So they were trying to fake them out so he wouldn’t know and turn them in ’cause it’s not bad for them to learn about the Bible [Koran]. They are trying to stay safe. Those are bad men who treat girls wrong . . .
40		Researcher	Yes.
41		Andre	So, so, the man won’t know if they are learning math or reading or other things. I get it. They are pretending.

Transcript 3

Line	Initiator	Responder	Dialogue
31	Jamal		Oh, a secret school for girls. Why do they need a secret school?
32		Ayana	I thought girls could go to school.
33		Brandon	Me too.
34		Andre	Look at this page (Read a sentence.) “Taliban soldiers don’t want girls to learn about the world.” (Showed e-reader to Jamal.) That’s not right. Girls can go to school ’cause everybody has to learn.
35	Andre		Where was this happening? Not here. I can’t remember. (Started flipping through the digital pages.)
36		Jamal	(Flipped to first page of book.) It says Afghanistan. That’s not here. That’s the war place. We have a war with them . . .

Jamal raised an initial question (31) that focused the group’s attention on the domination of the Taliban over the lives of girls. The group struggled to understand a perspective that would not view girls as equal to boys while considering the fairness of such actions (32–34). Andre assumed responsibility for shared learning (Jennings et al., 1999) when he prompted Jamal to look closer at the text (34). Then, Andre sought clarification about the context of the events, and Jamal sustained the conversation by citing evidence based on his reading. There was an attempt not to understand words in isolation but to piece together facts from the story to construct an understanding as a whole (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Jamal’s comment (37)—“It says they have to sneak away from the soldiers. What if they get seen?”—not only expressed his curiosity but engaged his peers in going beyond what was already known about girls attempting to go to school in Afghanistan (Lindfors, 1999). Next, Ayana, Jamal, and Andre each took turns building upon previous statements to interpret the text (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Eventually, they determined that the girls had outwitted the Taliban soldiers (38–41).

In this case, the students reflected about the information provided in the text and created a theory to talk about a difficult social issue that was unfamiliar to them (Short & Kauffman, 2005). The conversation went beyond the surface level where scripted programs may have focused (Mills & Jennings, 2011). Instead, there was a recursive cycle of learning that continued as students moved on to understand the issue of safety for girls, like Nasreen, who defied her community’s rules.

Understanding the larger world was a powerful experience for these students who had not had the opportunity to explore issues like safety and gender equality in the world. Transacting with the



text *Nasreen's Secret School* opened up a space for this dialogue in a structure that engaged students in democratic principles like critical consciousness and forming one's own understanding of important issues. The transcript above illustrated the students' ability to listen open-mindedly while constructing an understanding of this complex problem.

### Questioning Leads to More Questions

As the students investigated the case of Malala Yousafzai, a young girl with a similar problem to Nasreen, a new appreciation of asking questions, finding answers, and asking more questions developed. The students discovered that raising important questions only led to more questions. Their quest for knowledge was unending, and questions served as tools for the coconstruction of interpreting big ideas.

E-readers were used to access a YouTube video (ABC News, 2013) about the real-world experiences of a student named Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for attending school in Pakistan. The video opened with a reporter giving an overview of the story, followed by Malala speaking about her experiences. Then, there was a flashback to Malala lying on a stretcher with her head bandaged and a flash to the present when Malala was headed back to school.

The students put on their headphones and watched the ABC interview with Malala. This event started with the group focused on viewing their screens and listening to the interview. Then, much overlapping talk transpired as the group made connections to Nasreen's story and questions percolated, which caused some of the students to pause their videos or rewind them to relisten to particular sections.

Transcript 4

Line	Initiator	Responder	Text
83	Ayana		Hey, hey, is that really the girl we read about? Is she really real? That's her picture. (Pointed to image of Malala.)
84		Researcher	No, that's not the girl from the story, but Malala is a real girl who wanted to attend school like the girl in the book.
85	Andre		She's talking, talking about girls going to school. She says it's a right. Maybe that is like that other right, you know, we talked about. Right to vote? Girls have right to go to school, you know.

86		Ayana	Yeah, that's what I think too. Kids have a right to go to school. Even girls. It would not be fair for boys to go.
87		Brandon	Well, I'm a boy, so I would not care if girls couldn't go. I'm glad I'm a boy. (Laughed.)
88		Andre	But I would want my sister to go to school and my mom.
89	Brandon		Oh, oh, see this part. (Held up e-reader. Stopped video.) It said she was shot. Look at this! Her head is bandaged. She die?
90		Researcher	She did not die. Remember that she is telling you the story on the video, so you know she survived . . .
91		Brandon	You know, I just can't believe someone shot her for going to school. She (inaudible).
92		Jamal	That's terrible. I can't believe it, and she got shot in the head, and she was trying to learn.
93	Ayana		I'm finished with the video. She did go to school now. But, how? Are they going to shoot her again? I would not go if I was her. I would stay home and hide.

The literacy event originated with Ayana reflecting on the authenticity of girls not being able to attend school in countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan (83). The video brought the reality of the issue to the surface and made it seem more real than *Nasreen's Secret School* alone. Andre captured the essence of the Malala segment regarding the right of girls to attend school (86) and emphatically stated his viewpoint, given academic knowledge

(right to vote) coupled with personal experiences (his sister attended school) and cultural narratives (Mayer, 2012). Ayana validated this theory and raised concern about the fairness of only boys attending school (86).

The conversation turned when Brandon freely detached from the topic and assumed a more self-centered view, since he was a boy and this was a girl's issue (87). At this point, Brandon was closed to thinking about the larger world (Ayers, 2009) and was still learning to coordinate the personal, social, and intellectual aspects of the inquiry (Lindfors, 1999). Andre confidently rebutted Brandon's argument and hypothesized about the significance of this event in daily life (88). Each of the boys was able to express his ideas and opinions within the supportive group dynamics.

Later, through Brandon's question (89), the topic moved to understanding the sequence of events in the video. This genuine inquiry was an attempt to further not only his understanding of the event but that of the other members of the group as well, given they were able to listen in on this segment of the dialogue (Rex & Schiller, 2009). I clarified this point for Brandon (90), which allowed him to continue viewing the video with understanding. As the talk accumulated, Brandon and Jamal continued to grapple with the impact of this unjust action because it was so different from their points of view (91–92) (Pearson, 2010). Ayana continued to ask more questions about Malala's future (93) which implied a sense of persistence or a journey of lifelong learning (Lindfors, 1999). This connection between the real world and the students' own lives seemed to increase their interest in the text (McElvain, 2010).

The use of a multimedia text form appeared to make this real for students. Even though they had read about Nasreen, this experience expanded their understanding of the world in which they saw the power of an individual to enact change. Malala served as an example of possibility even within a restrictive environment. Collective interpretations of the video interview in this social setting permitted an expanded discussion of the rights of girls and the serious ramifications for pushing boundaries in other parts of the world. Students realized this through the shooting incident. The result was more questions than answers, which led to additional inquiries.

## Discussion

These transcripts provide evidence of the ways in which transaction circles utilize literacy in a way that assists in developing practices that are essential for citizens in a democracy. For example, the circles encouraged students to exchange and develop ideas by utilizing free-flowing talk, even if this meant disagreeing with one another (Pearson, 2010; Wells, 1999). Students also advanced their skills in becoming active agents of their own learning as they determined discussion topics, expressed ideas and opinions about difficult issues, and assumed responsibility for their own learning (Edelsky, 1999; Mercer 2007).

All of the students were able to enter dialogue at a level where they were capable of achieving success, and the group developed social stability in which students felt empowered to challenge ideas found in the texts (Rex & Schiller, 2009). For instance, in Transcript 3, Jamal, Brandon, Andre, and Ayana contemplated the

fairness of girls being denied schooling, and they questioned the motives of the men who did this. Textual interactions like these legitimated ways to "actively read, interpret, talk back to texts, as well as identify the many visible and invisible messages that comprise these texts" (Harste, 2010, p. 32). Being a reader in the 21st century requires blending print- and technology-based texts and applying a critical lens.

The power of interacting with these informational texts came from blending the digital version of traditional books with the related YouTube videos. In this case, the students actively integrated multiple sign systems to transform their thinking in dynamic and innovative ways by interpreting a repertoire of ideas from a variety of sources (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013). For example, the digital books brought new social justice issues to the surface for initial discoveries and discussions.

The YouTube videos added depth to the dialogue in a couple of ways. First, the videos solidified the reality of these problems. Initially, students struggled to understand the existence of countries where girls were not allowed to attend school and where children did not have access to books. The authentic video footage made an impact on the realities of what the students were reading. Second, the videos offered a different voice or perspective. The books were written from a third-person perspective, the author's. The videos permitted students an avenue for listening to first-person accounts from Luis Soriano and Malala Yousafzai. Additionally, the videos provided access to the information in a multimodal format, which freed any students who struggled reading the words in the digital texts and opened more opportunities for meaning making. In the end, students had the freedom to use their imaginations to question worldly ideas, which may lead to making wise decisions in the future (Short, 2012).

Democratic practices occurred throughout the events as students actively involved themselves in looking closely at the texts, gathering details and constructing knowledge. These experiences may have been missed in a traditional guided reading group because of the limited nature of the types of discussions driven by teacher questions with a focus on basic comprehension skills. As a result, I would argue that there was a deeper understanding of the concepts presented given the structure of transaction circles. This multifaceted interpretation came from the students' genuine inquiries, freedom to pursue a line of talk, and spontaneous responses to one another. There was considerable value in the process of students listening to and being shaped by developing discourse. For example, in Transcript 2, Ayana, Brandon, and Anthony came to the joint conclusion that the children in the video could read, which was contrary to their initial thinking. Each student, as well as the texts, served as a scaffold as they all referenced reasons for their arguments (Mercer, 2007).

In addition, because the texts were directly related to real-world issues, there were opportunities for social action (Chandler-Von Dras, 1993). Ayana (Transcript 2, Line 89) realized this when she offered to give books to the children in Colombia in response to their problem. I did not follow up on this notion for social action, given my role in this classroom and because the teacher was overwhelmed with the implementation of the new Common Core

Standards. This missed opportunity fell into the dialogue for the problem-posing phase of Souto-Manning's (2010) critical cycle. It would be beneficial to move students through the entire cycle toward personal and/or societal action in order to make change on even a small level. This would help students understand the empowerment that comes with critical literacy as a form of agency for one's self and the world (Giroux, 1988).

## Implications

In order for students to develop control over constructing their own meanings based on messages presented in the world, critical media literacy is imperative. Therefore, a curriculum and pedagogy based on analyzing and interpreting communication within different social contexts is recommended, especially given the technological mediums available to students both in and out of school (Kellner & Share, 2007). The following guidelines are suggested for educators to consider as they work to integrate this into their instruction (New London Group, 1996).

1. Empower students by encouraging them to express their views using media and technology.
2. Reconfigure classroom life to be critical.
3. Reframe what is valued in literacy instruction to include multiliteracies.
4. Require students to read and interpret multimodal texts in flexible ways.
5. Permit interactions with informational texts to be aesthetic.
6. Link critical literacy with education for democracy through active social involvement in global issues.

This new pedagogy and curriculum should be responsive to the many resources that students draw from as they make sense of texts (in the broadest sense) like languages, discourses, and technological expertise.

Transaction circles are a curricular structure that can be easily integrated into any existing literacy curriculum. The selection of socially relevant texts (including multimodal formats) will provide topics for democratic principles that can be facilitated by educators as they allow students space, agency, and opportunities for open-ended dialogue. Although transaction circles alone do not foster social action, teachers may follow up with student discussions and opportunities for social action projects that target students' concerns or determination to enact change originating from the original texts. It is essential for transaction circles to be used within a critical media literacy framework in order to move students toward societal change.

Further investigation is needed to refine the role of the teacher in text selection for transaction circles. By solely placing all of the power in the teacher's hands, there is an inherent danger of undermining democratic education by excluding student voice and choice. Alternatives for including students in the process of selecting high-quality literature are needed and may come from posing this problem to the students themselves. Opening a space for students and the teacher to solve this issue may lead to rich conversations that unpack children's goals and their relationship to democratic practices (Johnston, 2012).

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